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The evidence of after-death survival of human consciousness according to the winners of the Bigelow contest: a scientific examination

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the strength of scientific evidence, reproducibility and replicability of the 29 essays of the winners of the Bigelow contest.

Six essays (20.5%) were included in the category with the high strength of scientific evidence. Four essays (14%) were included in the category with medium strength of scientific evidence and the remaining 19 essays (65.5%) in the category with low strength of scientific evidence.

The overall agreement between our strength of scientific evidence categories and the Bigelow ones, was only 48.8%, sufficient to demonstrate a clear difference between our scientific criteria and those adopted by the judges of the Bigelow contest.

The essays that obtained the highest strength of scientific evidence level were related to near-death experiences and mental mediumship.

For other phenomena, more studies with refined experimental designs are necessary to increase the evidence of the survival of human consciousness.

Keywords: survival; near-death-experiences; mediumship; reincarnation; consciousness

Introduction

In June 2020, Robert T. Bigelow, a famous aerospace entrepreneur from the United States, founded the Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies (BICS) in order to support research into both the survival of human consciousness after physical death and the nature of the afterlife. The first BICS initiative was the launch of an international contest to award contestants for writing papers summarizing the best evidence available for the survival of human consciousness after

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permanent bodily death. According to the BICS contest the “essays should be focused on scientific evidence as well as objective and subjective supported documentation as gathered:

- From special cases, including older cases, from very credible witnesses;
- From photographic or electronic data;
- From all available literature;
- From highly validated and authenticated human experiences;
- From other relevant sources.” (<https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/about.php>)

The evaluation of the essays was assigned to six judges, Brian Weiss, Jeffrey J. Kripal, Leslie Kean, Christopher C. Green, Jessica Utts and Harold Puthoff (<https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/judges.php>). They agreed on the criteria for evaluation and, after reading all 205 selected essays independently, they sent their rankings confidentially to Bigelow headquarters so that the votes would not influence the other judges. The votes were tallied, and the majority ruled. The final ranking with the corresponding prizes assigned to the essays’ authors, was announced on November 1, 2021 (<https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/News4.php>).

The aim of this paper was to re-analyze the content of the 29 winners’ essays, following scientific criteria currently adopted for the evaluation of scientific evidence. This different type of evaluation was not implemented in order to dispute in any way the method of evaluation that was legitimately adopted by the six judges, but simply as a comparison.

In the medical and clinical sciences in general, there are several guidelines regarding how to evaluate the strength of scientific evidence of a particular medical and therapeutic intervention which may assist the adoption of evidence-based or empirically supported treatments (Sakaluk et al. 2019; Guyatt, et al. 2008; Balshem et al. 2011). For example, see Figure 1. We note that there are no agreed upon similar guidelines to evaluate the strength of scientific evidence of a specific theory, model or phenomenon.



Figure 1: Hierarchy of the strength of scientific evidence of clinical interventions
Adapted from Credits: <https://www.sciencenews.org/blog/context/critique-medical-evidence-hierarchies>

However, in the last ten years, as a consequence of the reproducibility or replicability crisis that impacted many of the scientific fields (e.g., psychology, economics, neuroscience) (Wikipedia contributors, 2021; Nosek et al., 2022), direct or conceptual replications (LeBel, Vanpaemel,

Cheung, & Campbell, 2019; Schmidt, 2009), that is, studies using the same experimental design, sample characteristics, materials and procedures or with variations testing the generalizability of previous findings, are considered the gold-standard for supporting the reality of a phenomenon. This recommendation supports the hierarchy presented in Figure 1: i.e., that systematic reviews and meta-analyses must be considered the strongest tools for supporting the strength of scientific evidence. Consequently, we decided to modify the hierarchy of scientific evidence presented in Figure 1, as follows (see Figure 2):

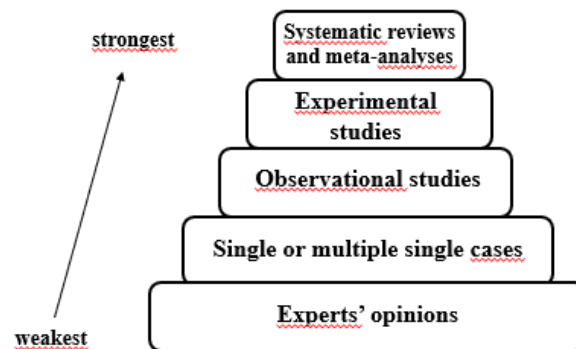


Figure 2: Hierarchy of the strength of scientific evidence adopted in the present study.

Experts' opinions can be obtained from interviews or questionnaires. Multiple single cases are first or third-person descriptions of individual experiences. Observational studies are investigations about specific phenomena carried out on random or specific samples of participants by using questionnaires, interviews, specific tasks, etc., without control of independent or moderator variables. Experimental studies are investigations with random or specific samples of participants where specific phenomena are observed under controlled conditions, which typically test two or more different hypotheses, e.g., "are mediums' accuracy above or within chance expectations?"; "are near-death experiences similar or different to other autobiographical experiences?". Systematic reviews are a selection and discussion of all available evidence related to a specific phenomenon following precise inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., type of studies, date of publication range). The database of a systemic review may or may not be meta-analyzed; that is, analyzed quantitatively using meta-analytic statistical algorithms.

Another significant change in scientific practices, implemented as a consequence of the reproducibility and replicability crisis, is referred to by the term "open science practices" (see <https://www.cos.io> ; Nosek et al., 2015). This term denotes the various practices that allow independent researchers to reproduce a study or potentially replicate the results of a study.

In order for a study to be reproducible, the author(s) must accurately describe how the study was carried out (e.g., how participants were selected, the procedure, the materials used, how the data was analyzed). Additionally, the author(s) must provide open access to all materials, raw data and the codes necessary to allow the possibility to reproduce or reanalyze the original findings independently.

In order for results to be replicable, the author/s must describe accurately how the study was carried out (e.g., how participants were selected, the procedure and materials used, how the data was analyzed), to allow independent researchers to replicate the study's findings with different samples, materials and even with some modifications to the procedure in order to test the robustness and the generalizability of the previous results.

The aim of this study was to examine the strength of scientific evidence, reproducibility and replicability of the 29 essays of the winners of the Bigelow contest and to compare our classification with the one adopted by the judges of the Bigelow contest based on the criteria listed in the introduction.

Method

Materials:

The 29 winners' essays are available open access and were downloaded from the BICS webpage https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/contest_winners3.php on 24 November 2021 (see list in alphabetical order in the Supplementary materials).

The winners were classified into three categories: the top three winners (contest category 1), the eleven winners of \$50,000 (contest category 2), and the 15 winners of \$20,000 (contest category 3).

Procedure:

Authors PT and AR, discussed and agreed to independently assess each essay using the top four Bigelow contest ranked essays as examples, following these scientific criteria:

- Study materials: i.e., the source of information. We differentiated the scientific from the general literature. The former pertains to all studies carried out using shared scientific methods (e.g., systematic observation of the phenomenon by using first and third-person sources, its correlates and causes) and experimental designs, mostly published in peer-reviewed, scientific journals. The latter refers to all materials available online, in books, private correspondence, etc., mostly including personal opinions and interpretations, and data observed or collected by using non-scientific methods, etc.
For each essay, we calculated the percentage of scientific literature with respect to all cited references.
- Strength of the scientific evidence in decreasing ranking order: 5-quantitative and qualitative meta-analyses or systematic reviews of scientific studies; 4-experimental studies; 3-observational studies; 2-single cases of first-person direct experiences with or without third-person concurrent validation; 1-experts or personal opinions.
- Reproducibility: is the information included in the essay sufficient to independently reproduce the original findings? This item was applied only to the essays including novel findings obtained by their authors and not to those referring to published scientific and non-scientific literature.
- Replicability: has evidence of the phenomenon been replicated by independent authors? For this item it was sufficient that there was at least one replication.

Results

Scoring

For the systematic reviews, given that none of the authors followed international guidelines (e.g., Appelbaum et al., 2018; Page et al., 2021), we adopted a more liberal criterion; that is, we considered essays to be systematic reviews, if they included most of the scientific studies available up to 2020 related to the phenomena discussed in the essays.

For the scoring of the “Strength of the scientific evidence” variable (SSE), given that in most of the essays cited and discussed various sources of information (e.g., single cases, experimental studies, meta-analyses), we adopted a prevalence criterion; that is, we selected and scored the type of sources of information the authors used most in their essay.

The strength of scientific evidence total score (SSETS), was obtained by summing the strength of the scientific evidence score plus one point each if the reproducibility and the replicability items were judged as “yes”. The total score’s theoretical range was 0 to 7.

From the SSETS, we derived three strength of scientific evidence categories (SSECat) applying the following cut-offs: Cat 3 = $SSETS \leq 3$; Cat 2 = $SSETS > 3$ and ≤ 5 ; Cat 1 = $SSETS > 5$. Even if arbitrary, these cut-offs allow one to identify three levels of SSE that can be compared with the three Bigelow contest categories.

Interrater agreement

First round interrater agreement for the three SSECat was 70% and reached 100% after discussing minor discrepancies.

Main results

Table 1 presents the SSE and SSECat in descending order and the Bigelow contest category (BCat) of each of the 29 essays. The full database with all scores related to the SSE, reproducibility, and replicability, is available open access at: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.17211878.v1>

Table 1: SSE, SSECat and BCat assigned to each of the 29 essays.

Author (s)	SSE	SSECat	BCat	Author(s)	SSE	SSECat	BCat
Beischel J.	Systematic review	1	2	Mays, R. et al.	Multiple single case studies	3	3
Delorme A. et al.	Systematic review	1	3	Meyer zu Erpen W.	Multiple single case studies	3	3
Long J.	Systematic review	1	2	Mishlove J.	Experts' opinions	3	1
Parnia S. et al.	Systematic review	1	3	Nahm M	Multiple single cases	3	2
Roe C. et al.	Systematic review	1	3	Neppe V.	Multiple case studies	3	3
van Lommel P.	Systematic review	1	1	Rawlette S.	Multiple single cases	3	2
Fenwich P.	Observational studies	2	3	Rocha A	Single case study	3	2
Kastrup B.	Experimental studies	2	2	Rouleau N.	Expert's opinion	3	2

Kerr C.	Observational studies	2	3	Ruickbie L.	Multiple single cases	3	1
Rousseau D. & Billingham J.	Observational studies	2	2	Sommer A.	Multiple single case studies	3	3
Braud S.	Multiple single case studies	3	2	Taylor, G.	Multiple single case studies	3	3
Carter C.	Multiple single case studies	1	3	Taylor, S.	Multiple single case studies	1	3
Cook N.	Multiple single case studies	1	3	Tymn M	Multiple single case studies	1	2
Krohn E.	Single case study	1	2	Weerasekera A.	Single case study	1	3
Leininger B.	Single case study	1	3				

Comment

The overall agreement between SSECat and BCat was 48.8%, sufficient to demonstrate a clear difference between our scientific criteria and those adopted by the judges of the Bigelow contest.

Among the six essays in the first SSECat, only one (van Lommel) was assigned to BCat 1, two (Long and Beishel) were assigned to BCat 2, and the remaining three (Delorme et al., Parnia et al., and Roe et al.) were assigned to BCat 3.

General Discussion

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this study was not to dispute the criteria adopted by the judges of the Bigelow contest, but only to examine the scientific strength of the 29 essays. As expected, our scientific criteria yielded different ranking scores to the 29 essays with respect to those assigned by the six judges of the Bigelow contest who adopted different criteria.

According to the data presented in Table 1, six out of 29 essays (20.5%), were included in the first SSECat. If we add the four essays included in the second category, the percentage rose to 34.5%.

Among the essays included in the first SSECat, three (vanLommel; Long; Parnia et al.) are related to near-death-experiences (NDEs), one (Beishel) to mental mediumship, and two (Roe et al.; Delorme et al.) to the above phenomena plus other experiences (i.e., after-death-communication, reincarnation, hauntings).

Given that NDEs studies are currently published in mainstream scientific psychology and neuroscience journals, it is not surprising that three essays related to these experiences obtained the highest scientific strength scores. Even if most of the scientific literature examined in the three essays is common, each of them includes complementary specific information. For example, van Lommel et al. discussed the mind-brain relationship in NDEs along with other phenomena (e.g., placebo, meditation, end-of-life experiences) as convergent support for the primacy of consciousness and its nonlocal characteristics.

In contrast, Long discussed the frequency of some new NDEs characteristics extracted from his large and probably unique database of first account NDEs, e.g., the characteristics and vividness

of sensorial information; the comparison of the consciousness level and alertness with that in the normal everyday condition; NDEs memory accuracy with respect to other personal life events, etc.

Parnia et al., given their expertise in resuscitation procedures, presented interesting details about brain physiological processes that occur after cardiac arrest and how they differ in the transition from reversible to irreversible cell damage.

Beishel's essay is a systematic review of the evidence obtained by the application of more advanced experimental designs for the scientific investigation of mental mediumship. Beishel was one of the first authors to devise experimental designs that avoided any potential conventional communication of information related to the requested deceased, between the medium and the sitters (the persons who request a mediumship consultation). By using such experimental designs, it was possible to quantify the level of accuracy of the medium's reading and investigate whether the medium's anomalous information reception pertains to the telepathic scanning of the sitter's mind (the super-psi hypothesis) or communication with the deceased (the survival hypothesis). According to Beishel, the findings of this line of investigation clearly support the survival hypothesis.

The Roe et al. and Delorme et al. essays are two systematic reviews of the scientific evidence related to many phenomena concerning the survival hypothesis. Whereas Roe et al. review the evidence obtained from the scientific literature and describe some specific cases, Delorme et al. present an original analysis of the scientific evidence of such phenomena and the results of a survey about what experimental evidence might convince them about the survival of human consciousness.

For the examination of the scientific strength of the different phenomena, Delorme et al. devised a structured grading system ranging from grade A (strong evidence) to grade F (no evidence), similar to the grading system used in the present study. For grade A, the scientific evidence must be obtained by prospective, blinded, pre-registered and meta-analyzed experimental studies, replicated by independent groups, not explainable by materialist science and not requiring statistical analyses to be observed. For grade F (no evidence) the evidence must be obtained either by systematic fraud or obvious documented and undocumented flaws (see their Table 1 on page 10 for further details).

Following their criteria, mental and physical mediumship obtained the best grade, corresponding to B+, followed by NDEs and reincarnation studies with B-, electronic voice phenomena, instrumental transcommunications and death-bed visions with C+, and apparitions, induced experiences of survival and after-death-communications with grade C.

The main results of their survey, were that two experiments were rated as being more convincing in support of the survival hypothesis: - the experiment testing the vision of randomly selected images by patients scheduled for a cardiac arrest, very similar to the Aware study (Parnia et al., 2014) and a mediumship experiment where people in hospice agreed to contact one or more mediums after they passed away.

Conclusions

From the examination of Bigelow essays, it emerges that the scientific investigation of the survival of human consciousness after physical death is alive and well, although presently, only NDEs are accepted as facts in mainstream science with an ongoing debate regarding their origin,

i.e., are NDEs a byproduct of brain activity or a manifestation of the survival of human consciousness?

Mental mediumship is another phenomenon with good strength of scientific evidence that can be investigated with good experimental designs (see references in the Beishel's essay).

In contrast to Delorme et al., we contend that end-of life, shared death and after-death communication experiences as well as reincarnation phenomena are currently investigated with good scientific methodology (e.g., Elsaesser et al., 2021; Masayuki, 2017; Penberthy et al., 2021; Shared Cross Initiative, 2021; Tucker, 2016), whereas phenomena like physical mediumship, electronic voice phenomena, and instrumental transcommunications require more advanced experimental designs in order to support their reality.

Our hope is that the Bigelow contest has been an opportunity to raise the scientific interest in possibly the most fundamental existential question, and that more authors become involved in the scientific exploration of this line of investigation.

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CRediT author statement

PT: Conceptualization; Methodology; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Data curation; Visualization; Writing - original draft preparation; Writing-Review & Editing;

AR: Methodology; Validation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Data curation; Visualization; Writing - original draft preparation; Writing-Review & Editing;

LP: Conceptualization; Writing - Review & Editing.

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Supplementary materials

The twenty-nine winners of the Bigelow contest listed in alphabetic order

Authors	Essay Title	Full text link
Beischel J.	Beyond reasonable: scientific evidence for survival	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Julie_Beischel.pdf
Braud S.	A rational guide to the best evidence of postmortem survival	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Stephen_Braude.pdf
Carter C.	The Case for the Afterlife	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/1_Chris_Carter.pdf
Cook N.	What Is The Best Available Evidence For The Survival Of Human Consciousness After Permanent Bodily Death?	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/2_Nick_Cook.pdf
Delorme A. et al.	Advancing the Evidence for Survival of Consciousness	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/3_Dean_Radin_et_al.pdf
Fenwick P.	To Be And Not To Be. This is The Answer: Consciousness Survives	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/4_Peter_Fenwick_et_al.pdf
Kastrup B.	A rational, empirical case for postmortem survival based solely on mainstream science	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Brnardo_Kastrup.pdf
Kerr C.	Experiences of the Dying: Evidence of Survival of Human Consciousness	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/5_Christopher_Kerr.pdf
Krohn E.	The Eternal Life of Consciousness	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Elizabeth_Krohn.pdf
Leininger B.	Consciousness Survives Physical Death Definitive Proof of Reincarnation	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/6_Bruce_Lehninger.pdf
Long J.	Evidence for Survival of Consciousness in Near-Death Experiences: Decades of Science and New Insights	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Jeffrey_Long.pdf
Mays, R. et al.	There is no death: Near-death experience evidence for survival after permanent bodily death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/7_Robert_Mays.pdf
Meyer zu Erpen W.	Pursuit of Best Evidence for Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/8_%20Walter_Meyer_zu_Erpen.pdf

Mishlove J.	Beyond the brain: The survival of Human Consciousness after permanent bodily death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/docs/1st.pdf
Nahm M	Climbing Mount Evidence - A Strategic Assessment of the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Michael_Nahm.pdf
Neppe V.	What is the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death?	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/9_Vernon_Neppe.pdf
Parnia S. et al.	What is the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness After Permanent Bodily Death?	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/10_%20Sam_Parnia_et_al.pdf
Rawlette S.	Beyond Death - The Best Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Sharon_Rawlette.pdf
Rocha A	Mediumship as the Best Evidence for the Afterlife: Francisco Candido Xavier, a White Crow	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Alexandre_Roch_et_al.pdf
Roe C. et al.	A Critical Evaluation of the Best Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/11_Chris_Roeet_et_al.pdf
Rouleau N.	An Immortal Stream of Consciousness	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/Nicolas_Rouleau.pdf
Rousseau D. & Billingham J.	What would have to be true about the world? On evidence for the possibility of consciousness surviving death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/David_Rousseau_et_al.pdf
Ruickbie L.	What is the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death?	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/docs/3rd.pdf
Sommer A.	What is the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death?	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/12_Andreas_Sommer.pdf
Taylor, G.	What is the Best Available Evidence for the Survival of	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/13_Greg_Taylor.pdf

	Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death?	
Taylor, S.	The Next Phase of the Journey: The Evidence for the Survival of Human Consciousness after Permanent Bodily Death	https://www.bigelowinstitute.org/Winning_Essays/14_Steve_Taylor.pdf
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